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Exploring Historical Space and Environments in the History/Social Studies Classroom II: Introduction

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With the following articles we conclude this series on the use of GIS in the classroom. We begin with an example of the use of GIS in the World History Classroom by Ruth Mostern. While there are some additional challenges to getting data, Professor Mostern shows that with a bit of creative thinking teachers can find a lot of useful geographic data for students to use and explore world-wide.

Barry Robinson takes GIS mapping into an undergraduate ethnographic history seminar class. Rather than depending on existing data sets, students were charged with that task. They gathered and explored a variety of traditional primary and other sources, and then assembled them into maps of native American cultures. This initial project will lay the foundation for an on-going GIS-based resource to which students in other classes will add.

Jack Owens' essay discusses the use of GIS at the Graduate level and the development of an M.A. program that focuses heavily on the use of GIS in historical work. The Idaho State Program is a pioneering effort and provides an array of stimulating possibilities for history departments and faculties to consider even if they are not interested in developing a full-fledged program of this sort.

All of the articles in this two-part series have spanned the history curriculum from middle school through the graduate level, from departments in small schools to large universities. Essays have focused primarily on the use of GIS in courses that have the broadest student impact – the introductory level classes – however, they also demonstrate the potential for GIS to help students explore problems in more advanced classes and graduate programs, problems and issues that historians have long recognized as important for discussion in the profession and the classroom. As these articles have demonstrated, GIS can be used simply to produce static map images for use in lectures, or to provide interactive learning experiences for students in the classroom or in the field. The approaches described all increase student awareness of the interpretive nature of maps and the importance of spatial, as well as temporal relationships to effective understanding of history.

The technological barriers to using GIS in the classroom and to increasing emphasis on the spatial dimension of history have been falling, as has the cost of GIS software. In part, this development is the result of the “computerization” of classrooms as well as faculty offices over the past decade-and-a-half, but even within the framework of that hardware availability, other transformations now provide opportunities that were not available as little as five years ago. Teachers can now effectively use free software and widely available, free data sets, much of which are easy to download from the internet (e.g., Google Earth). Software employed for other purposes, e.g., Photoshop, can be adapted to develop data and maps even if one does not have the time to learn new, fully-featured GIS software. Even at the high end, the costs for site-licensed GIS software for educational use have dropped significantly and the steep learning curve has been reduced to some degree.

The field continues to change, and a number of our authors continue to experiment with new approaches to using GIS in the classroom; in the final section of this feature they discuss such changes in the broader contexts of their concerns about using GIS in the history classroom and their recommendations for those interested in exploring the potential for GIS to advance student understanding of history. This discussion was held on-line as a follow-up to our original American Historical Association sessions and the submission of manuscripts for these two issues of JAH. That discussion provides suggestions for learning more about GIS, issues that need to be considered when using GIS in the classroom, data sources, and other related matters.

Reviewing the follow-up discussions and reflecting on all the articles in this series, I am again struck by the degree of excitement that our authors have found in adapting GIS to pedagogical uses in the history classroom. In part, that excitement comes from the reactions of their students, the strong student interest that comes from hand-on research experience with GIS or the “Aha!” moment when relationships are clearly displayed on maps. But their sense of adventure is also sparked by the intellectual stimulus that comes from the interdisciplinary contacts that their work with GIS entails. In working with these authors, and with others experimenting with the use of GIS in their research and teaching, I have found supportive, excited and creative colleagues eager to help colleagues work through the challenges and opportunities GIS presents. I hope that this series of essays has helped to demonstrate the value of GIS in the classroom and that it will encourage readers to join this growing community of teachers and scholars.